

**Brasilia: Living in the Shadow of Idea**  
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Brasilia, the capital of Brazil, is the most audacious civic experiment conducted in the twentieth century. This city was built using ideas that were intended to thrust Brazil into the modern age. Brasilia's identity lies in its quintessentially modern architecture, its revolutionary transit system, its scientifically organized sectors, and its boldness. But the city has no character, no personality—just the failure to be as mammoth as its idea. There is a conflict between this perfectly efficient city and its inefficiencies connecting with people. Brasilia was built to face every challenge and obstacle except reality, and the dominance of utopian idea and the lack of human nature in Brasilia's plan evidences why its inhabitants are disconnected from the city.

The idea of Brasilia has always existed among Brazilians as the ultimate symbol of national strength. Ever since Brazil gained independence from Portugal almost 180 years ago, it was evident that Rio de Janeiro's coastal location made it vulnerable to be attacked in a wartime situation. A safer, inland location was the obvious solution to this problem. Italian immigrant and patron saint Joào Bosco prophesied that the Central Plateau, the land Brasilia sits on, would be Brazil's Promised Land 75 years before construction began (Goulart). Brasilia, before construction was even conceived, was Brazil's opportunity to become a global force. This city was a developing nation's promise for a brighter future (Holston 16-17).

Critical analysis of Brasilia's form is widespread. During the late fifties and early sixties, it was a popular focal point for architectural, anthropological, and historical scholars. James Holston, the author of The Modernist City, is the expert on the significance of Brasilia. He looks at Brasilia as an ideal example of Modernism, in functionality and design. The city's idea, according to Holston, is not birthed from human emotion but rather from the inhuman forces of

logic, mathematics, and functionality. For contemporary purposes, however, Holston's work is outdated. He did not have the advantage of seeing how 45 years affected Brasilia's purpose and relevancy. No scholar has examined Brasilia as an "idea" rather than as a city. To see, through contemporary times, Brasilia as an idea overpowering the city itself is to realize that this "city" is aloof to its people. In other words, the people and the city are two separate entities, and because of this, the people are disconnected. Scholars have, thus far, ignored this facet of Brasilia, but its analysis is essential in the study of how humans react to places and environments.

The nation of Brazil was prepared for its new capital, but missing one key element, Brasilia's plan. A nationwide contest was held among design firms who were simply asked to design a city for 500,000 people (El-Khoury 48). Lucio Costa was the only designer with the boldness to submit a "fixed" plan. Most planned cities such as Washington, D.C. have an "organic" plan, or they have a structure and allow the city to grow naturally as the people, culture and technology grow. Costa's plan called for a massive construction project that, when completed, would be the capital in its final form. The speed with which Brasilia could be built was attractive to President Kubitschek, who promised Brazil 50 years of progress in 5 years, or the "50 in 5" plan (Snyder 36). Costa's plan was also chosen because it recognized Brasilia's isolated location and chose the materials of the buildings accordingly. Because many of the buildings were uniform in design and concrete in composition, the materials could easily be mass-produced. These two realities made construction of the city in less than five years viable. The architecture, however, was not Costa's; the job of creating the architectural theme went to Oscar Niemeyer. Niemeyer is known for his mastery of minimalist architecture, which is appropriate with Costa's plan because minimalism is very much the child of modernist thought

(Snyder 37). The pieces for Brasilia were in place, and in 1960, as Costa had predicted, the city was introduced to the world three years after groundbreaking.

The idea of a fixed city is one many have contemplated, but not until Brasilia has it been implemented on such a large scale. Organically planned cities mimic the people and the geography. Brasilia, in contrast, is imposed upon the land it sits on. There is no two-way relationship between the land and the city. This is especially important in understanding the “idea” of Brasilia. Organic cities develop according to their geography, but the fixed aspect of Brasilia forces it to stay constant throughout changes that the social or physical climate might bring. Costa’s decision to keep Brasilia’s development rigid was, as David Snyder argues, “to define and maintain an over-all image” because “[m]ost national capitals of the world have prescribed an image for the immediate area of major governmental buildings, but have allowed this island to become immersed in a sea of uncontrolled urban sprawl” (37). Once again, the scheme to give Brasilia a mystique not experienced in any other place is seen and can explain how the “idea” behind Brasilia is so powerful.

The power behind Brasilia is most easily quantified in the sense of awe that most feel upon their first visit. The motif of modernistic architecture gives an automatic first impression of being futuristic. Two of the most strikingly modern structures in Brasilia are the Metropolitan Cathedral and the Palace of Dawn, which is the presidential palace. Both of these structures were designed by Oscar Niemeyer but contracted out to Joao Paulo Rabello’s construction company. Dave Rabello, Joao Rabello’s grandson, gives the same first impression in an interview. Rabello recalls that on his first visit to Brasilia, “the futuristic nature of the structures shocked me; they made the city feel like Brasilia was out of a science fiction film.” This shock is the natural reaction and that which was desired by Lucio Costa, Oscar Niemeyer, and Joao Rabello. The

uniqueness of the structures gives a mystique that Brasilia is not like any other city. This mystique initiates a powerful relationship between the “futuristic” nature of the buildings and one’s perception of what Brasilia is. After an individual visits Brasilia, the visceral reaction to the structures causes one to think of the city in terms of this reaction. Rabello says before visiting, he “had no idea that structures so bizarre could actually be constructed” and that “the exterior of the cathedral and the presidential palace are awe-inspiring.” In conclusion, Rabello confirms the final purpose of Brasilia in saying that when he sees “Brasilia’s awesomeness it makes [him] proud to be a Brazilian.”

Unfortunately, Rabello has never lived in Brasilia, and first impressions do not reflect the long-term effects of this city. But the mystique that Brasilia impresses upon individuals helps to create the idea of Brasilia. This mystique is also, in turn, a key player in establishing aloofness between the city and its inhabitants. Marcus Goulart, a personal driver who worked in Brasilia for six months, says that, “Brasilia is a very cold city. Everything is grey concrete and unless you are a government official, or an architectural buff it isn’t worth visiting.” Goulart’s experience of Brasilia is different from that of Rabello because Goulart is not a member of the upper class. Goulart has to work every day in Brasilia and feels the aloofness between the city and him. These two perspectives—that of the working class and the upper class—are vital in understanding how the mystique of Brasilia is powerful but does not connect with those who operate in the city.

A key to the selection of Costa’s plan was his use of simplicity and logic in the organization of Brasilia’s sectors. As *Washington Post* journalist Eugene Robinson discusses, the city’s industries and groups of similar interest are clumped together. For example, there is a hotel sector where all the hotels are located. There are residential sectors where only residential

development is permitted. There is a commercial district where only commercial tenants are allowed. The entertainment services also have their own sector (Robinson). The advantage of this system lies in the simplicity of an individual never having the problem of finding a hotel or a grocery store. Each building is a part of the very intricate numbering system that makes finding one's way around supposedly easy. This system is organized to the extent that finding a particular building is like trying to find a book in a library. Unfortunately, the grid in certain places makes finding that library book very difficult. Robinson continues his examination of Brasilia's divisions claiming that the grid is "more complicated than it has to be. Suffice it to say that sector 101-S is a lot closer to sector 701-S than it is to sector 107-S, and anyone who lives [in Brasilia] can tell you that." This system, then, ignores the human need for community and neighborhood. Having to depend on a store across town for one's survival does not give a resident a sense of community. People depend on communities to avoid becoming lost in a large city. James Kunstler believes that cities are best organized as a synthesis of communities and describes the community as "something akin to a living organism composed of different parts that work together to make the whole greater than the sum of its parts" (3). By creating one large community as opposed to many self-sufficient communities, Brazilians cannot connect with their city but are like permanent outsiders living in the shadow of Brasilia's perfectly efficient concept.

One of the more well known trademarks of Brasilia's efficiency, or lack thereof, is its transit system. One of Costa's common phrases about transit when designing the plan was "the man multiplied by the motor," meaning the individual is more efficient and productive when utilizing motor vehicles to the fullest of their potential (qtd. in Holston 101). Because of this fundamental belief, Brasilia is a city built for the machine age, where the ease of automobile

transport is of utmost importance. James Kunstler disagrees that automobile transportation will advance future society, and he argues that the philosophy of “the man multiplied by the motor” contradicts what is necessary for advancement for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Therefore, to secure a sustainable future, Kunstler claims that:

[society] shall have to give up mass automobile use. By this, I do not mean an end to all cars but rather, that every individual adult need not make a car trip for every function of living: to go to work, to buy clothes, to have a drink; that every adult need not be compelled to bear the absurd expense of car ownership and maintenance as a requisite of citizenship. (248)

This idea that automobiles may inhibit future advancement raises a fundamental flaw in Costa's plan. Costa's assumption that the car betters man is one that comes with many costs that will inhibit the future. Fossil fuel supplies will inevitably run low, and the sulfates and greenhouse gasses emitted will eventually take their toll on a Brasilia's air quality. Brasilia's transit system's flaws lie not only in its incorrect assumption that the automobile is the future for personal transportation, but also, in a more practical sense, in its plan. Costa's plan includes no streets as one commonly thinks of them, but replaces them with speedways. He believed that the concept of streets lined with buildings is not suitable for the machine age and conflicts with Brasilia's idea. The removal of focal points along the street fundamentally changes the philosophy behind transit. The extreme efficiency of getting from point A to point B in Brasilia excludes scenery or diversion of any kind. This makes transit in Brasilia a process of tolerating the means to get to an end. Over time, this structure eventually creates a pessimistic mindset where rewards are not found in everyday life but only in the fulfillment of goals. This concept is also seen when analyzing the reality that Brasilia has no streets or intersections. Without intersections there are

no corner gas stations or coffee shops; this also has a negative social effect on citizens. James Holston argues that street corners are places where people have informal social interactions. Brazilians are forced to turn these friendly encounters at the local cafe into formal visits to one's place of residence. Given that home visits are naturally more infrequent and formal, this form of "small talk," which most frequently occurs on the street, becomes dead. This denies the inhabitants of Brasilia the human right to socialize casually (107). The design of Brasilia's transit system inconspicuously disconnects citizens and proves again that this city's idea to be more important the citizen's well being.

A tenet of Brasilia's concept for the modern age was to integrate all races and economic classes completely. Costa implemented this belief in his design of the residence buildings that supposedly every Brazilian would live in. The design calls for all citizens to reside in "superquadras," units of four high-occupancy apartment buildings. Each building is designed to be unrecognizable from another. The higher-priced suites are only distinguishable from the inside where nicer amenities and higher square footage can be enjoyed (Snyder 43). This assumption that the poor and the rich are similar in culture and thus can cohabitate a building is naive. Brazil is a very economically stratified nation with a small, very wealthy upper class and with a lower class that takes up 70 percent of the population (Goulart). In Rio De Janeiro (the capital prior to Brasilia), the government officials were naturally separated from the middle and lower classes. Because the upper class in Brazil is so small, the individuals tend to be more elitist and uninterested with the concerns of the rest of the nation (Goulart). Forcing these two groups to mix in a living space after nearly 200 years of separation is not reasonable. Oscar Niemeyer, (Brasilia's chief architect) after fierce criticism on Brasilia's pretentious presumption that civic modeling can solve economic and social segregation, was quoted in saying, "Brasilia was never

supposed to create a New Man, never intended to erase Brazil's monumental inequalities” and that “those who deplore misery ... won't resolve it on the drawing board” (qtd. in Robinson). The idea of economic integration is modern and utopian in concept, but once again, not connected with the realities of Brazil and its uneven economic stratification.

The civic design of Brasilia was not alone in its effort to create the idea that overpowers this city. Oscar Niemeyer, the architect for this project, used his modern style to create a greater picture of Brasilia. One of Niemeyer's main tenets was to give very little flexibility and alteration in public building. He believed allowing too much alteration would cause a disruption in Brasilia's “harmony” (Holston 90). Niemeyer, for the entirety of his life, was a member of the Brazilian-based communist party (Holston 88). This personal political philosophy cannot be and obviously is not separated from his work in Brasilia. The themes of uniformity, equality, and power are both seen in Niemeyer's architecture and the precepts of communism. These themes do not entail that this architectural approach is bad or will never work, but its relevance in a country like Brazil must be questioned. Brazil during the 1950's was a developing democracy struggling to gain a stronger global presence. As Fareed Zakaria believes, the best avenue for states in this situation is the pursuit of democracy and capitalism. Niemeyer's architecture does not reflect these goals and thus is not best suited for the future of Brazil. The superquadras, for instance, place everyone in a structure where economic differences are less noticeable. More and more, the achievements and hard work of the wealthier individual become marginalized in the architecture of Brasilia. This is not in line with what the goals should be for a developing democratic nation trying to gain more global power. Brazil wanted Brasilia to be a symbol of the new world order. The problem that lies in the architecture is that its goals are not appropriate for a developing nation and are thus bad for Brazil's future.

The aloofness of the government and work sectors with the residential sectors was an aspect of Brasilia intended to highlight such individuality and these separate aspects of the city. Forty years of reality has proved that these separations widen the economic gap and cause more social problems for the people of Brasilia. The governmental sector in Brasilia is only accessible through automobile or public transport from one's residence. The government officials have no problem commuting using a car because they can afford the gas and the car. The laborers who, contrary to Costa's superquadra system, live in satellite towns outside the district, are forced to use the expensive bus system to commute to work (Holston 163). Having the government separated from residential sectors places a heavy burden on the already struggling lower class. Another issue with this separation readdresses the "enduring the means to achieve the end" mindset that was addressed earlier. The individuals who commute to work arrive only when necessary and leave whenever possible. This exacerbates rush hour traffic and causes extreme dead periods during non-working hours. A popular aphorism, "house and work" describes the essence of life in Brasilia (Holston 163). The people lack the third element of entertainment that naturally fuses the three, which diffuses the "enduring the means for the end" approach to life.

One of the first observations a tourist to Brasilia would note would be that the city is dead during the night. Pre-Brasilia, politicians enjoyed the luxury of working in Rio, where hundreds of beautiful beaches and some of the best nightlife and culture anywhere coincide with the government's headquarters. The switch to Brasilia was one many government officials did not enjoy. For the first several years, the work week would consist of midday Monday through Thursday. Everyone who could afford it would fly to Rio every weekend. The situation is not terribly different today. The reality of Brasilia being a commuter city between work and home makes places of recreation obsolete in the business districts. A Brasilia resident recalls that

“[w]eekends in Brasilia are deadly. The most exciting place to be on Friday evenings is the airport, where politicians and bureaucrats engage in a fall-of-Saigon scramble for the last flights to Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, anywhere” (qtd. in Robinson). Costa’s assumption was that structured, “one size fits all” entertainment complexes, which he outfitted each superquadra with, would satisfy all resident’s desires. Individuals, when looking for nightlife, flock to unique clubs and bars, which have personality. Brasilia, due to the fixed plan’s rigidity, cannot offer these types of venues. People desire spontaneity and a small amount of disorder to feel unique. A cold and inflexible idea like Brasilia is impressive and powerful in symbol but in an element such as entertainment very repulsive due to human nature. A lifetime Brasilia native reflects, “This was a good place to grow up, but this is a city to study and work in, nothing more” (qtd. in Robinson).

While in the district there is no real culture definitive of Brasilia, the satellite towns, which are not subjected to the district’s building codes, have rich cultural life. Marcus Goulart, a six-month Brasilia resident, comments that, “The satellite towns are definitely poor, but the people are very content and happy” and that “because they are separated from the coldness of Brasilia, these towns are lively.” These communities just a few miles outside of Brasilia are proof that the human spirit flourishes in organic spaces, not rigid, cold ones.

As the construction began to materialize, Costa realized that the reality of satellite towns outside the district to house manual laborers was inevitable. Almost from the very beginning of Brasilia there have been several towns nestled around the 15-mile ring around Brasilia. These towns today are where most Brazilian laborers still live and recreate. Initially these towns were ignored and not given proper sanitation, utilities, or law enforcement. This was an act to forget the unfortunates outside of Brazil’s great monument to Ideals. These ideals, one again, prove to forget the plight of the lower-class individual. These towns bring to the surface two main

realities of Brasilia. The lively cultures of these towns show that rigidity does not lend to the innate human desire for flexibility. Brasilia was a town built to usher in Brazil's age of Modernism, but this powerful idea ignored seventy percent of the country who cannot fully utilize this idea called Brasilia.

Brazil is a nation that has been struggling for many years to shed its third-world status. Brasilia was to be this nation's symbolic savior, to usher in the modern age by use of civic design that was before its time. Although the intention was beautiful and admirable in vision, Brasilia misjudged human nature and what a capitalist country really needs to break out of a state of mediocrity. People need a level of randomness and alteration from standards, values Brasilia is unable to offer its citizens. The structured and rigid design of Brasilia bottlenecks all citizens into a state where work and progression is of utmost importance and happiness is a secondary concern. These elements come together to infect a society with very subtle and slow moving but costly problems. All of these concepts that come together to make up Brasilia create an overarching idea that defines and becomes Brasilia. The idea behind Brasilia disconnects its citizens, and the citizens are unfortunately just observers who are subjected to the powerful idea of Brasilia. This city is an idea, a group of ideals and social remedies, not a living, breathing organism that individuals can connect with. No matter what a system like Brasilia provides, if it is not compatible with the human nature, a disconnect between the people and their city is inevitable.

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